Discourse Patterns in Hip Hop and Rebetiko

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Introduction: This paper describes the discourse patterns that emerge in the lyrics of Rebetiko, an urban folk genre that flourished in the ghettos of Athens in the early 20th century, and illustrates its relation to the language praxis and ethos manifested in the lyrics of Hip Hop. Furthermore, we provide quantitative data supporting the claim that part of the Rebetiko discourse was the extensive use of street language.

Dissing: The analysis builds on Androutsopoulos & Scholtz (2002) framework about the rap rhetoric and focuses on dissing, an expression of verbal disrespect towards a person who is considered to deviate from the Hip Hop concept of authenticity. We propose that instances of dissing against deviations from the Rebetiko authentic ethos are also found in the Rebetiko lyrics like below:

Hey thug, if you want to handle your blade,
you need to have guts to take it out.
I told you to behave coz I 'll kick your ass.
"Hey you show-off” (1936)

Street Language – Commercialization: Rebetiko employed slang expressions as part of its street language repertoire (Petropoulos, 1967). The use of street language provided Rebetiko songs with an authentic street flavor (Holst, 1990) in a way similar to Hip Hop (Alim, 2004; Portner, 1995). Our analysis showed that the ratio of slang words per song decreases significantly following Rebetiko commercialization. We interpret this tendency in parallel to the relation between Rebetiko and authenticity; as Rebetiko gradually went public, its connection with the authentic subculture was weakened.

Proposal: We propose that Rebetiko and Hip Hop employ the same discourse strategy in order to express disrespect towards fake manifestations of particular conceptualizations of authenticity. We also show that street language is a distinctive element of the Rebetiko discourse and the extend of its use to be negatively correlated to its commercialization.

Keywords: street language, authenticity, Hip Hop.